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Chapter 9

The Paradox of Eden and Black-and-White Mary

Yujin Nagasawa

1. Introduction

God created Adam and Eve, placed them in the Garden of Eden, and commanded them not to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. However, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command and ate the forbidden fruit. Accordingly, God punished them for their disobedience. This is the famous story of Eden in Genesis 2-3.

This story is likely the best known account of the origin of sin. It has been overlooked, however, that the story contains a puzzle, if not a flaw. Richard R. La Croix makes this point by deriving what he calls the 'paradox of Eden' from the story and argues that it entails, contrary to what Judaeo-Christian theists believe, that justice is not one of God's essential properties.¹ The aim of this essay is to formulate the strongest possible formulation of the paradox and argue that it nevertheless fails. In order to develop a novel solution to the paradox I try to show that we can appeal to a hitherto unnoticed structural similarity between the story of Eden and the black-and-white Mary scenario which is used in the philosophy of mind to construct arguments against physicalism.

This essay has the following structure. In section 2, I introduce La Croix's paradox of Eden. In section 3, I offer objections to the paradox. In section 4, I develop a new form of the paradox that is not vulnerable to the objections. In section 5, I

¹ Richard La Croix, 'The Paradox of Eden', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984), p. 171.

introduce the Mary scenario and existing responses to it. In section 6 I provide a solution to the paradox, which appeals to a structural similarity between the story of Eden and the black-and-white Mary scenario. Section 7 concludes.

2. The Paradox of Eden

According to La Croix, the story of Eden shows that justice is not one of God's essential properties because God's act in the story is unjust. La Croix presents his point by formulating a paradox or a dilemma that Judaeo-Christian theists face.

Before eating the forbidden fruit, either Adam and Eve knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, or they did not. Suppose that they knew, that is, they already possessed knowledge of good and evil. Since God is omniscient, He must have known this. He must have known, moreover, that Adam and Eve would not very likely be tempted to eat the forbidden fruit because they would have nothing to gain by doing so, their already being in possession of the very knowledge that would be gained by eating the fruit. Hence it is unjust for God to have set such a test for Adam and Eve. Suppose, on the other hand, that Adam and Eve did not know, before eating the fruit, that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil. In this case Adam and Eve did not possess knowledge of good and evil in advance and so they could not possibly have understood that it is good to obey and evil to disobey God's command. Thus God's punishing Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit is unjust. Hence, in either case God's act in the story is unjust. Therefore, La Croix concludes, the story of Eden entails that justice is not one of God's essential properties. This is a devastating conclusion. For theists who believe that God is essentially just, the paradox of Eden is effectively an argument against the existence of God.

The paradox can be summarised as follows:

The Paradox of Eden

- (1) Before eating the forbidden fruit, either Adam and Eve knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, or they did not.
- (2) If, before eating the forbidden fruit, they knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then it is unjust for God to have set the test for Adam and Eve.
- (3) If, before eating the forbidden fruit, they did not know that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then it is unjust for God to have set the test for Adam and Eve.

Therefore,

- (4) It is unjust for God to have set the test for Adam and Eve.

Therefore,

- (5) Justice is not an essential property of God.

3. Objections to the Paradox

Let us focus on premises (2) and (3) as premise (1) is uncontroversially true. Premise (3) says that if, before eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve did not know that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then it is unjust for God to have set the test for Adam and Eve. This premise assumes implicitly that Adam and Eve had to know good and evil in order to follow God's command not to eat the fruit. One might reject this assumption. One might point out, for example, that, in order for Adam and Eve to follow God's command, they needed only an interest in self-preservation or a pragmatic reason to follow what God says.² However, if we interpret the story of Eden charitably as a story about morality, Adam and Eve do seem to have needed knowledge of good and evil in order to understand the command in a morally significant way. Hence, it does seem unjust for God to have set the moral test for Adam and Eve if they really did not

² I am indebted to Campbell Brown and Klaas Kraay on this point.

know that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil. Premise (3), therefore, seems reasonable.

Premise (2) says that if, before eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then it is unjust for God to have set the test for them. This premise is problematic. La Croix says that if Adam and Eve knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then God's setting the test is unjust because it would be unlikely for Adam and Eve to choose to eat the fruit and God must have known it in advance with his foreknowledge. However, it is far from clear that the mere fact that Adam and Eve knew that eating the forbidden fruit is evil entails that they were unlikely to eat it. Consider a parallel case. The fact that one knows that it is morally wrong to steal does not immediately entail that one is unlikely to steal. We know that there are many situations in which one is fully aware that it is morally wrong to steal but one does steal. In response to this, La Croix might emphasise that it is unlikely for Adam and Eve to eat the fruit because, given that they already knew what is good and evil, they would gain nothing by eating the fruit. Eating the fruit while already possessing knowledge of good and evil is comparable to stealing something that one does not need. However, whether or not Adam and Eve knew what good and evil are in advance, the story of Eden tells us that they did eat the forbidden fruit!

Second, even if La Croix is correct in saying that Adam and Eve would very likely *not* be tempted to eat the forbidden fruit, it does not follow that God is unjust. On the contrary, it seems perfectly just for God to forbid people who do have knowledge of good and evil to perform a morally wrong action. God's act could be deemed unjust if, for example, He tricked Adam and Eve into eating the fruit. However, that is not what the story of Eden tells us. On the contrary, it tells us that they freely chose to eat the forbidden fruit.

Third, even if God had complete foreknowledge and He had known in advance what Adam and Eve would do, it is far from clear that God's test is unjust. Many Judaeo-Christian theists hold that human freedom and God's foreknowledge are compatible. If they are right, it might have been the case that, on the one hand, God knew in advance what Adam and Eve would do but, on the other hand, they made the decision to eat the forbidden fruit freely. If so, God's setting the test does not seem to be unjust.

The paradox of Eden, therefore, fails at premise (2).

4. The New Paradox of Eden

We have seen that while premise (3) of the paradox of Eden is reasonable, premise (2) is untenable. Is it possible to reformulate the paradox by using premise (3)? As premise (3) says, if, before eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve did not know that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then it is unjust for God to have set the test for them. This means that in order for God's command for Adam and Eve to make sense it has to be the case that Adam and Eve did know, before eating the fruit, that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil. In fact, that seems consistent with what the Bible says. At the beginning of the story of Eden God commanded Eve, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die' (Gen. 2:16-17). This command implies that Adam and Eve did know, before eating the forbidden fruit, what good and evil are. In sum, in order for God's command to make sense the following must be true:

- (6) Before eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve had knowledge of good and evil.

However, at the end of the story of Eden, according to the Bible, God also said 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil' (Gen. 3:22). Note the phrase 'has now become'. This suggests that Adam and Eve *acquired* knowledge of good

and evil as a consequence of eating the forbidden fruit. That is, the following must be true:

(7) After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve acquired knowledge of good and evil for the first time.

Now the real puzzle in the story of Eden is clear. On the one hand, in order for God's command to Adam and Eve to make sense, it must be the case that Adam and Eve knew what good and evil are in advance. That is, (6) must be true. On the other hand, however, in order for the ending of the story to follow it must be the case that Adam and Eve acquired knowledge of good and evil only after they ate the forbidden fruit. That is, (7) must be true. But the problem is that (6) and (7) seem mutually inconsistent because (7) seems to imply the negation of (6):

(\neg 6) It is not the case that, before eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve had knowledge of good and evil.

We can now formulate the following 'new paradox of Eden':

The New Paradox of Eden

(8) If the story of Eden is coherent, then Adam and Eve had knowledge of good and evil before eating the forbidden fruit (otherwise God's command does not make sense).

(9) If the story of Eden is coherent, it is not the case that before eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve did not have knowledge of good and evil (otherwise the ending of the story does not follow).

(10) If the story of Eden is coherent it is both true and false that Adam and Eve had knowledge of good and evil.

Therefore,

(11) The story of Eden is not coherent.

Unlike the original paradox, the new paradox does not entail that God is unjust. Yet the conclusion of the new paradox is also devastating for Judaeo-Christian theists as it undermines the coherence of the story of Eden, which is regarded as one of the most important stories in the Old Testament.

5. The Mary Scenario in the Philosophy of Mind

How can we respond to the new paradox? In the rest of this essay I demonstrate that the inconsistency that the new paradox tries to reveal is illusory. I argue that the apparent inconsistency arises due to an equivocation on the notion of knowledge in premises (8) and (9). In order to show this, I set aside the story of Eden for the moment and introduce the black-and-white Mary scenario that has been adduced against physicalism in the philosophy of mind.

The black-and-white Mary scenario was introduced by Frank Jackson as part of his so-called knowledge argument against physicalism.³ Imagine Mary, a brilliant scientist who is confined to a black-and-white room. Although she has never been outside her room in her entire life, she has learned *everything* there is to know about the physical world from black-and-white books and lectures on a black-and-white television. Mary's complete physical knowledge subsumes everything about the physical facts and laws of physics, which includes causal and relational facts and functional roles; this is the beginning of the Mary scenario. Physicalism is the metaphysical thesis that, in the relevant sense, everything is physical, or as contemporary physicalists often put it, in the relevant sense, everything logically or metaphysically supervenes on the physical. Thus, if physicalism is true, Mary, who has complete knowledge about the physical, must have complete knowledge *simpliciter*. What will happen, Jackson continues, when Mary leaves her room and looks at, say, a ripe tomato for the first time? According to physicalism,

³ Frank Jackson, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1982), pp. 127-36; Frank Jackson, 'What Mary Didn't Know', *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), pp. 291-5.

she should not come to know anything new because she already knows everything physical there is to know. It appears obvious, however, that she will discover something new upon her release; namely, ‘what it is like to see red’, a phenomenal feature of her colour experience. This contradicts the physicalist assumption that Mary, prior to her release, has complete knowledge *simpliciter*. Therefore, Jackson concludes, physicalism is false.

A challenge for physicalists that Jackson poses here is this: On the one hand, physicalists must affirm that Mary knows, before her release, everything there is to know because she already has complete physical knowledge. On the other hand, however, it seems obvious that she will learn something new upon her release.

Physicalists have introduced a number of responses to Jackson’s argument but the ones that are relevant to us here are responses according to which the knowledge argument equivocates on the notion of knowledge.⁴ There are at least three such responses:

Response 1: Know-How Response

Gilbert Ryle defends the distinction between knowledge-that and knowledge-how.⁵ Knowledge-that consists of propositions that one knows such as the proposition that one plus one is two. Knowledge-how is, on the other hand, tacit knowledge that arguably cannot be reduced to knowledge-that. Consider the knowledge of how to ride a bicycle. One can in principle have complete knowledge of a bicycle and a human body by reading extremely detailed books about them; yet one can never know how to ride a

⁴ For a comprehensive survey of responses to the knowledge argument see Daniel Stoljar and Yujin Nagasawa, ‘Introduction’ in Peter Ludlow, Yujin Nagasawa and Daniel Stoljar (eds), *There is Something About Mary: Essays on Phenomenal Consciousness and Frank Jackson’s Knowledge Argument* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 1-36.

⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

bicycle unless one actually acquires the know-how by riding a bicycle. According to the know-how response to the knowledge argument, the Mary scenario equivocates on knowledge-that and knowledge-how.⁶ It says that Mary knows, before her release, everything physical there is to know in the form of knowledge-that. However, upon her release, she acquires new knowledge-how, such as knowledge of how to identify red, how to distinguish red from blue, and so on. This does not mean that there is a non-physical proposition that escapes Mary's complete physical knowledge prior to her release. Therefore, it concludes, the knowledge argument fails to undermine physicalism.

Response 2: Indexicality Response

The second response to the Mary scenario appeals to the distinction between non-indexical knowledge and indexical knowledge. Indexicals are such expressions as 'I', 'this' and 'now', whose references depend on a context of utterance. For example, my utterance of 'I' refers to Yujin Nagasawa but Plato's utterance of 'I' refers to a different person, namely, Plato. According to the indexicality response to the knowledge argument, the Mary scenario equivocates on non-indexical knowledge and indexical knowledge.⁷ It says that Mary knows, before her release, everything physical there is to know in the form of non-indexical knowledge. However, upon her release, she acquires new indexical knowledge expressed as '*this* is what it is like to see red'. This does not mean that there is a non-physical proposition that escapes Mary's complete physical knowledge prior to her release. Therefore, it concludes, the knowledge argument fails to undermine physicalism.

⁶ David Lewis, 'What Experience Teaches', *Proceedings of the Russellian Society* 13 (1988), pp. 29-57, reprinted in William G. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 447-61; Lawrence Nemirow, 'Physicalism and the Cognitive Role of Acquaintance', in William G. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 490-99.

⁷ John Bigelow and Robert Pargetter, 'Acquaintance with Qualia', *Theoria* 61 (1990), pp. 129-47; John Perry, *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001).

Response 3: Acquaintance Response

Bertrand Russell famously contends that there are two kinds of knowledge; knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.⁸ Knowledge by description is indirect knowledge of objects, knowledge that is mediated by other objects and truths. So we have knowledge by description ‘when we know that it is “the so-and-so” ’.⁹ Knowledge by acquaintance is, on the other hand, knowledge of objects by means of direct awareness of them. So we have knowledge by acquaintance when ‘we are directly aware [of a thing], without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths’.¹⁰ According to the acquaintance response to the knowledge argument, the Mary scenario equivocates on knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.¹¹ It says that Mary knows, before her release, everything physical there is to know in the form of knowledge by description. However, upon her release, she acquires new knowledge by acquaintance of her colour experience. This does not mean that there is a non-physical proposition that escapes Mary’s complete physical knowledge prior to her release. Therefore, it concludes, the knowledge argument fails to undermine physicalism.

In the next section, I show that the Mary scenario is structurally parallel to the story of Eden. I show, moreover, that we can construct a successful solution to the paradox of Eden by appealing to the indexicality response and the acquaintance response.

6. Responding to the New Paradox of Eden

Again, a challenge that the Mary scenario poses for physicalists is this: On the one hand, they must hold, given that Mary has complete physical knowledge, that she knows, before her release from her black-and-white environment, everything there is to know.

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, originally 1912).

⁹ *ibid*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 25.

¹¹ Earl Conee, ‘Phenomenal Knowledge’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1994), pp. 136-50.

On the other hand, however, they cannot deny the obvious fact that she acquires something new upon her release. Interestingly enough, this is structurally parallel to the challenge that the new paradox of Eden poses for Judaeo-Christian theists. On the one hand, in order to maintain the validity of God's command, they must hold that Adam and Eve had, before they ate the forbidden fruit, knowledge of good and evil. On the other hand, however, in order to maintain the ending of the story, they cannot deny that Adam and Eve acquired knowledge of good and evil by eating the fruit. The parallel structure motivates us to respond to the new paradox of Eden by adopting the above-mentioned responses to the Mary scenario.

Apply, first, the know-how response. We have seen that in order for premise (8) of the paradox of Eden to be true, that is, in order for God's command to make sense, Adam and Eve must have known, before eating the forbidden fruit, what good and evil are. Suppose that at that time they knew what good and evil are only in the form of knowledge-that. That is, they knew what good and evil are through propositional understanding of them. Nevertheless, it was perfectly possible for them to understand, in a morally significant way, God's command not to eat the fruit. We have also seen that in order for premise (9) to be true, that is, in order for the ending of the story of Eden to follow, Adam and Eve must have come to know, after eating the forbidden fruit, what good and evil are. We might suppose that at that time they came to know it in the form of knowledge-how. That is, they learned how to identify good and evil, how to distinguish good from evil and so on. Unfortunately, this solution does not succeed because Adam and Eve had to be able to identify good and evil and distinguish good from evil *before* eating the forbidden fruit. Without these know-hows they would not have understood God's command. The know-how response, therefore, is not applicable to the new paradox of Eden.

I submit, however, that the other two responses – the indexicality response and the acquaintance response – succeed in refuting the new paradox of Eden. Again, in order for premise (8) of the new paradox to be true, that is, in order for God’s command to make sense, Adam and Eve must have known, before eating the forbidden fruit, what good and evil are. Suppose that at that time they knew what good and evil are only in the form of non-indexical knowledge or knowledge by proposition. Nevertheless, it was perfectly possible for them to understand, in a morally significant way, God’s command not to eat the fruit. Now, again, in order for premise (9) to be true, that is, in order for the ending of the story of Eden to follow, Adam and Eve must have come to know, after eating the forbidden fruit, what good and evil are. We can suppose at this time that they came to know it in the form of indexical knowledge or knowledge by acquaintance. That is, they came to know that *this* is what good and evil are and they became *acquainted* with the experience of being good and evil. This means that the new paradox equivocates on the notion of knowledge: While premise (8) is based on non-indexical knowledge or knowledge by description premise (9) is based on indexical knowledge or knowledge by acquaintance. Thus the story of Eden is not incoherent. The interpretation of the story of Eden that the above responses entail is faithful to the moral of the story. Adam and Eve perfectly understood God’s command as they had already known what good and evil are in a morally significant way. However, by breaking God’s command themselves they had a first-hand experience of committing a morally wrong act and thereby learned what good and evil are very vividly.

7. Conclusion

I began by arguing that La Croix’s original paradox of Eden fails because its second premise is vulnerable to several objections. I then introduced the new paradox of Eden which is not vulnerable to these objections. I tried to develop a novel solution to the new paradox of Eden, a solution which appeals to a structural similarity between the Mary

scenario against physicalism and the story of Eden. I showed that while the know-how response to the Mary scenario is not applicable to the new paradox of Eden the indexicality response and the acquaintance response successfully refute the paradox.

The above discussion hints at an interesting point about the story of Eden. Perhaps Adam and Eve became acquainted with good and evil, not because the fruit had an unseen property that makes people understand what good and evil are, but simply because they had a first-hand experience of committing an evil act of disobeying God's command. So the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not essential to the story; God's command could have been concerned with some other object.